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Shiites yet another force Israelis must reckon with

By Mark Lavie
Special to The Tribune

JERUSALEM—As newly freed prisoners, most of them Shiite Moslems from southern Lebanon, clambered aboard trucks leaving the Ansar detention camp last week, they voiced their antagonism against the Israeli army occupation by shouting anti-Israeli slogans.

The question now is, Have the Israelis, who invaded Lebanon nearly three years ago to wipe out Palestinian guerrilla camps that were attacking Israeli settlements, created a new menace—Shiite guerrillas?

Israeli Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin, who believes the Shiites will lose their motivation for attacking Israeli soldiers and settlements when the troops complete their three-stage withdrawal, once admitted that the war in Lebanon had "let the Shiite genie out of the bottle."

In a recent closed session of a parliamentary committee, Rabin was quoted as warning that Israel will adopt "a scorched-earth policy" if anti-Israel guerrilla activity continues in southern Lebanon.

Interviewed this week on Israel television, Rabin did not deny that he had used that term. But, he said, he wanted to put it in perspective.

"All we want is to live and let live," he said. "But if the terror continues, what does our response have to be? We have no choice but to say to them today, if there is no quiet here, there will be no quiet there, and there will be no quiet there in the most significant possible way."

Since Feb. 16, when the Israelis began their second stage of withdrawal, Shiite guerrillas have launched an average of five attacks daily against Israeli troops, and more than 20 Israeli soldiers have been killed. The Israelis have arrested an estimated 500 Shiites and about 70 Shiites have died in the fighting.

When Israel invaded southern Lebanon in June, 1982, it did not consider the local population a potentially hostile element. In fact, Israel proclaimed that it was doing the locals a favor by removing the Palestine Liberation Organization from their midst, and at the beginning the people agreed. Israeli forces marching toward Beirut were greeted warmly.

But by the next month, even in the East Beirut stronghold of Israel's erstwhile allies, the Christian Phalangists, the people started sending a clear message to anyone who would listen. A gas station attendant, looking at the Green Line dividing his part of the Lebanese capital from the Moslem half, told an Israeli, "Don't overstay your welcome."

In the south, the message was even more explicit.

Nabatiyeh in July, 1982, was like a carnival. The Shiite residents, some of whom were driven out when the PLO set up bases and others who left when Israel responded with repeated artillery attacks, were streaming home after years as refugees.

These Shiites embraced the Israelis and forced presents on them. But again in Nabatiyeh the warning was issued: Don't overstay your welcome, because then we will consider you an occupier like the others and we will fight to get you out.

Israeli officials give many reasons for the Shiites of southern Lebanon suddenly turning against Israel after virtually ignoring the Jewish state through the first 35 years of its existence. They point to the growing influence of the Shiite regime of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in Iran and to the internal power struggle among the Lebanese Shiites.

Recently, according to Rabin, a southern Lebanese Shiite leader was summoned to Iran, where Khomeini instructed him to declare an Islamic Republic in Lebanon. He refused.

However, Israeli military intelligence officers believe Khomeini's radical influence has brought about the suicide car-bombers, who have struck Israeli targets, as well as American and French installations.

The dominant political organization among the Lebanese Shiites, Al-Amal, faces a challenge from the fundamentalist Hizbollah and other fringe groups. Israeli specialists say each faction tries to show it is more extreme than its rivals, and one way to prove extremism is to attack Israeli targets.

But officials here are finally admitting that the presence of the Israeli army has played a significant role in fomenting Shiite guerrilla activity.

A senior Israeli military intelligence source said, "It is quite clear that our presence in Lebanon and the breaking of the PLO structure in the south led to the release of energies in the Shiite community. Israeli army actions to prevent attacks create more and more attacks against us. It is clear that if we are not the major element, at least we are a major element in this process."

Israeli military intelligence believes that once the army withdraws, the Shiites will get involved in their own internal conflicts. Also, the military is counting on threats such as Rabin's to discourage attacks across the border.

But some sources express concern about the fanaticism of the Shiite extremists. Some fear terror attacks of the type never attempted by the Palestinians. The extremist Islamic Jihad group, which claimed responsibility for the truck bomb that killed 12 Israeli soldiers just inside the Lebanese border last month, said the real target of the attack was the nearby Israeli town of Metulla.

Within two weeks, the Israeli Cabinet is expected to approve the final stage of the withdrawal from Lebanon. A Cabinet minister confirmed this week that the army is expected to be out of Lebanon by the end of next month.

Then Rabin's theory of defending Israel from its own side of the border will be put to the test. If southern Lebanon remains quiet, Israel will at least be able to point to that accomplishment from its long and tragic involvement in Lebanon. But if the Shiites transfer their attacks on Israeli soldiers to attacks on Israeli settlements, Israel's involvement will not be over for a long time.

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